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# Pueblo Indian Catholicism: The Isleta Case

Christopher Vecsey

At the northern reaches of New Spain in the sixteenth century, in the territory that is today New Mexico (and part of Arizona) lived Indians of several language groups (Kiowa-Tanoan, Keresan, Zunian and Uto-Aztec) dwelling in agricultural pueblos as many as 140 in number in a population exceeding 40,000. Each of these pueblos was a tightly knit society with numerous sodalities that enforced the will of the group in order to foster cooperation in distributing meager water resources and arable lands. The religious lives of these peoples expressed the overriding concern for fertilization through seasonal ceremonials and rites of initiation into the various sodalities. Priesthoods upheld cultural values, kept calendars, passed down myths and esoteric knowledge, and elaborate masquerades maintained symbolic contact between the spiritual sources of life and the Pueblo communities.<sup>1</sup>

Francisco Vasquez de Coronado's military expedition in 1540 to the famed Seven Cities of Cibola initiated what would be three centuries of Spanish contact with the Pueblos, during which time these Indians would come to know intimately of Christian institutions. It was not, however, until the end of the sixteenth century that Spanish Christian conquest took place among the Pueblos. In 1573 the Spanish Crown issued Ordinances of Discovery, which outlawed (at least in principle) expeditions of conquest like that of Coronado. Henceforth, peaceful missionary enterprises were to replace conquest on the periphery of New Spain. In 1581 the Franciscans commenced their first mission among the Puebloans. For the next hundred years, sometimes called the "Franciscan Century,"<sup>2</sup> more than two hundred friars traveled the road from Mexico City to these northern lands, hoping to establish Christian theocracies. The Spanish concluded before too long that evangelization was to require military conquest, Ordinances of Discovery notwithstanding. In 1598-99 Don Juan

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1. Ramon A. Gutierrez 1991. *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away, Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 46.

2. Ibid., 54.

de Oñate enforced Spanish rule at several pueblos, laying the foundation for a permanent Christian presence among the Indians.

At Acoma, Oñate noted the Indians' meek acceptance of his presence in kissing his ring and accepting the rule of king, pope, friar and conquistador; however, when Spanish soldiers violated Acoma girls, the Acoma Indians attacked the invaders and killed thirteen of them in December 1598. Oñate consulted with the Franciscans to determine if an attack of retaliation on Acoma constituted just war, and when they assured him of his military prerogatives, he and his soldiers stormed the Sky City and defeated the pueblo. Under the banners of the Virgin and Santiago the Spaniards killed eight hundred Indians and captured five hundred women and children, along with eighty men. After a trial the Indians were sentenced to slavery and butchery: everyone over age twelve was condemned to twenty years of servitude; all men over twenty-five had a foot amputated. Children under twelve were distributed to the friars as servants.

Such force made for the conquest of the Pueblos, but it served as a deterrent to conversion to Christianity, as the Indians asked the friars: "If [you] who are Christians cause so much harm and violence, why should [we] become Christians?" When Oñate quit his command over New Mexico in 1607, there were no more than six hundred baptisms of Pueblo Indians, including those children taken from Acoma. That is, few of the natives turned willingly to Christian initiation, despite (or because of) the military conquest.

A year after Oñate's resignation, Franciscans began to report large numbers of conversions, seven to eight thousand, with "others . . . clamoring for baptism."<sup>3</sup> There are no extant records of such baptisms, and so no one knows if the putative conversions were "fact or fiction,"<sup>4</sup> nevertheless, report of them meant that the Franciscan missions were to continue. In 1610 Santa Fe became the presidio and capital of New Mexico, and in 1626 the pueblo of Santo Domingo became the ecclesiastical center. In 1607 there were only three padres in New Mexico; by 1630 there were over thirty among the Pueblos, in addition to other priests at a monastery in Santa Fe. San Ildefonso, Nambe, Santo Domingo, Zia, Galisteo, San Lazaro, Sandia, Isleta, Pecos and Chilili all had mission centers, with *visitas* at neighboring Indian towns. Acoma, Zuni and Hopi gained mission stations in 1629, as the Franciscans tried to establish their spiritual regime over the western Pueblos as well as those along the Rio Grande.

In order to make more effective the processes of evangelization and control, the Franciscans concentrated Indian populations into fewer and fewer pueblos, so that only a third of the pueblos remained by the late seventeenth century. In

3. *Ibid.*, 55.

4. John L. Kessell 1979. *Kiva, Cross, and Crown. The Pecos Indians and New Mexico 1540-1840* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior) 93.

the seventeenth century the pueblos were *republicas* within the Viceroyalty of New Spain, semiautonomous municipalities with supposed rights of self-government. The Spanish Crown gave land grants to the Puebloans and canes of authority to the “little governors” of each pueblo, with traditional chiefs maintaining many powers associated with ceremonial life. At the same time, the Franciscans imposed themselves upon Puebloan jurisdiction, appointing natives to administer punishments and lead compulsory prayers and catechetical lessons. The Indian “officers were merely figure heads. The missionary, with the nearby presidio, was the directing and restraining force behind the pueblo governments.”<sup>5</sup>

The priests used their authority to suppress as much of Pueblo religion as they could, destroying whatever ceremonial aspects they found objectionable — e.g., the masks worn in many rituals — and coercing the Puebloans to participate in Catholic services. The padres burned thousands of religious objects, storming the kivas periodically and confiscating masks and statuary. The Franciscans used whipping and other forms of corporal punishment to expunge aboriginal religiousness from Indian culture, especially those aspects of religious expression that the priests found inappropriately sensual.

With perhaps twenty-thousand baptized Pueblo Indians by the middle of the seventeenth century, and only thirty to forty Franciscans at any one time, enforcement of Catholic orthodoxy was nigh impossible, try as the padres might. Revolts at Taos in 1639, Jemez in the 1640s, Cochiti in 1650, and elsewhere reduced the padres’ power periodically. At Zuni in 1632 the Indians killed the missionary and treated his body parts as “beneficent domestic gods,”<sup>6</sup> akin to enemies’ scalps.

The Catholic and Pueblo priesthoods were in direct competition with each other in the seventeenth century. Both headed religious systems possessing calendrical ceremonialism that expressed the themes and values of mythology. Both had ritual structures — kivas and plazas for the Pueblos, churches for the Christians — in which they held their community rituals according to strict rules of propriety. Both had religious paraphernalia — prayer sticks, fetishes, masks, yucca suds, tobacco for the Indians, crucifixes, statues, holy water, incense for the Catholics — that aided them in prayer and purification. The rites of passage — name-givings, initiations into kiva sodalities, versus baptisms, confirmations — revealed two separate orders of membership, one native, the other Christian. The Puebloans prayed to their divinities and invoked their sacred presence in the kachina ceremonies; the Spaniards held to the dogma of monotheism despite a triune deity and an elaborate cult of saints. Both communities engaged in worship, elaborated through an individual’s life

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5. Henry W. Kelly, “Franciscan Missions of New Mexico 1740-1760,” *New Mexico Historical Review*, 15 (1940): 373.

6. Gutierrez, 66.

and through the daily activities of the whole community, that aimed to align human existence according to divinely ordained patterns. Compliance with these holy powers had positive benefits, according to both priesthoods, although what those powers and what those patterns were differed from one to the other. For all their similarities of structure and religiousness — both priest-hoods believed firmly in theocracy in the face of enemies, witchcraft, and disorder — they constituted different religious systems that found themselves in opposition to each other.<sup>7</sup>

The Franciscans regarded Pueblo religion as devil-worship. Their Christian monotheism viewed the kachina cult as polytheistic idolatry, and the Indian priest-hoods as infernal foes of Christendom. What the Puebloans thought is less easy to ascertain. The Franciscans claimed that the Indians saw them as supernaturals whose powers superseded native force. The Indians' magic had not impeded the Spanish advance, and the palpable evidence of Spanish potency — their military might, their horses, etc. — gave the padres status among the natives as miracle workers. The friars tried to show their power over rain, this becoming something akin to the Pueblo rain priests; the clerics also claimed to heal with images of the Virgin and with the sign of the cross. They brought with them huge herds of livestock, thus demonstrating their prowess over animals. Perhaps these strange men were witches, perhaps they were magicians; in either case, they had powers to be reckoned with.

It is suggested that the Franciscans established new loci of spiritual power among the puebloans.<sup>8</sup> The Christian tabernacles, altars, relics, reredos, statues and the like, including the ever present crosses, constituted sacred space, and the Christian calendar with its feast days suggested a new order of time that Puebloans wished to appropriate. Perhaps the kachina cult could be combined with the cult of the saints. Perhaps chapels could serve as above-ground kivas. Animal and vegetal dances might be held in coordination with Christian holy days. Prayer sticks and crosses might be interchangeable as signs of divine power and aid, as well as sacrifice as a mode of worship. Jesus, Mary and Santiago could be war gods in the potential syncretism of Pueblo and Catholic religious systems.

At the same time, Christian and Pueblo systems held theologies and anthropologies at odds with one another; monotheism versus the innumerable kachinas; focus on the sky-heaven as opposed to the underworld; emphasis on the afterlife versus a this-worldly concern. The Puebloans did not believe in origi-

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7. Cf. Henry Warner Bowden "Spanish Missions, Cultural Conflict and the Pueblo Revolt of 1680," *Church History*, (1975 Vol. 44): 221-222; Henry Warner Bowden *American Indians and Christian Missions. Studies in Cultural Conflict* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1981), 46-47. Edward H. Spicer "Spanish-Indian Acculturation in the Southwest," with comments by Florence Hawley Ellis and Edward P. Doser, *American Anthropologist*, (Vol. 56), 679.

8. Gutierrez, 55-61, 82-88.

nal sin, nor in the need for atonement through the sacramental Church. Their reverence for Nature was at odds with Catholic spirituality, for all its sacramental symbolism of natural forms such as bread, water and oil.<sup>9</sup> In the seventeenth century there was little evidence that the Puebloans adopted the Christian worldview, despite the thousands of baptisms, despite the churches built and the friars supported by Indian labor. Ramon A. Gutierrez<sup>10</sup> writes:

...whether the Puebloans offered feathers and corn meal to the cross as they had to their prayer-sticks, honored the Christ child on Christmas as they had the Twin War Gods during the winter solstice, or flogged themselves on Good Friday as they had called the rain gods, the meanings attached to these acts were fundamentally rooted in Pueblo concepts.

Fray Angélico Chavez, O.F. M., concurs that “their limited grasp of Spanish Catholic doctrine and external worship dovetailed nicely with a native mythology which was their very life.”<sup>11</sup> As for syncretism, the Franciscans wanted nothing of it and did all they could to destroy the paraphernalia, structure and expressions of native religion. They “suppressed ruthlessly” Indian religiousness and Indian revolts; despite this “brutality” (and because of it), “Christianity was a failure”<sup>12</sup> among the Puebloans of mid-seventeenth century.

In 1660 the Franciscans complained that the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico were still “undisciplined, reveling in the old pagan rites ‘with costumes, masks, and the most infernal chants,’ goaded by Spanish Christians.”<sup>13</sup> By that time “the Pueblo Indians were seething with discontent” concerning the missionaries, directing their fury at the reputed “half-breed children fathered by the Franciscans.”<sup>14</sup> At Isleta they held a kachina dance in which they beat one such child lifeless; the friar carried a cross around the square, stripped naked, flagellating himself and wearing a crown of thorns, wailing to stop the performance. The late 1660s brought an extended drought, followed by pestilence and famine in the early 1670s, causing the deaths of many Puebloans. Navajos and Apaches attacked the Spanish colonial settlements and the pueblos in 1672, killing many Indians under Franciscan rule. When the divinities of neither the Pueblo nor the Christians came to the aid of the natives in the face of these disasters, there was talk of rebellion. In one village in 1672 the Indians

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9. Bowden, 223-225; Bowden, 47-51; Spicer, 668-669.

10. Gutierrez, 93.

11. Angélico Chàvez, O.F.M. (Rev.) 1967. “Pohe-Yemo’s Representative and the Pueblo Revolt of 1680,” *New Mexico Historical Review*, (Vol. 42), 86.

12. Richard Frost. “The Impact of Christianity on Pueblo Religion and Culture,” unpublished ms. In author’s possession 1992.

13. John Kessell. *The Missions of New Mexico Since 1776* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press 1980), 180.

14. Gutierrez, 123-124.

murdered the friar, after tying him to a cross. In other pueblos in 1673 the Indians danced forbidden native rituals, asking their deities to return and promising to forsake veneration of the Christian powers.

The Spanish regime reacted vigorously, according to the principles of colonial and spiritual conquest: "From the outset the friars set themselves the goal of stamping out every particle of native religion and substituting Catholic doctrines and practices, using force if necessary."<sup>15</sup> With the support of the Spanish military the friars persisted in whipping the neophytes, coercing attendance at church services, and destroying native religious regalia. In 1675 the governor arrested forty-seven Indians — many of them native priests and medicine men — on the charge of witchcraft directed at the friars. He hanged three and one committed suicide, before a delegation of angry, armed Pueblos negotiated for the release of the remaining forty-three. The governor said that the Indians promised they would "forsake idolatry and iniquity"<sup>16</sup> in the future.

Instead the freed religious leaders, led by a San Juan Tewa named Popè, began plans for a revolution against Spanish rule. Inspired by three gods of the underworld, Popè and his compatriots determined to rid their religious life of Christian contamination and their lands of the Spaniards. The Tewa organized virtually every pueblo into the insurrection, from Taos in the north to Hopi in the west, isolating those Indians deemed loyal to the friars and soldiers and establishing a chain of command capable of maintaining discipline through the battles to come. The Pueblos sent delegates to the Navajos and Apaches, securing their support for the duration of the revolt, and among their own people — reduced in numbers to thirty thousand, of whom two-thirds were baptized — the organizers made clear their reasons for fighting.

A month after the Pueblo revolution of August 1680, an aged Christian Indian told the Spanish why the rebellion had taken place:

He declared that the resentment which all the Indians have in their hearts has been so strong, from the time this kingdom was discovered, because the religious and the Spaniards took away their idols and forbade their sorceries and idolatries; that they have inherited successively from their old men the things pertaining to their ancient customs; and that he has heard this resentment spoken of since he was of an age to understand.<sup>17</sup>

A year later another Pueblo Indian recounted the insurrectionist aim espoused by Popè:

15. Bowden, 1975 222.

16. Kessell, 1979 227.

17. Charles W. Hackett and Charmion Clair Shelby. *Revolt of the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and Otermin's Attempted Reconquest, 1680-1682*, 2 vols. (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1942) Vol. 1, 61.

[to] break up and burn the images of the holy Christ, the virgin Mary and the other saints, the crosses, and everything pertaining to Christianity, and they burn the temples, break up the bells, and separate from the wives whom God had given them in marriage and take those whom they desired. In order to take away their baptismal names, the water, and the holy oils, they were to plunge into the rivers and wash themselves with . . . a root native to the country, washing even their clothing, with the understanding that there would thus be taken from them the character of the holy sacraments.<sup>18</sup>

Popè told his people to rebuild their kivas, carve new masks, and go back to the ways of their ancestors.

In order to accomplish their nativistic aims, the Puebloans needed to drive out the men who ruled over them. In 1680 there were fewer than three thousand Spanish inhabitants of New Mexico province, including mulattos and mestizos. Against them Popè amassed eight thousand Indian warriors, located throughout the pueblos, who targeted particular enemies for death. In the first day of the revolution the Indians killed twenty-one of the thirty-three religious — eighteen missionary priests, two lay brothers, and the Santa Fe church prelate; in the whole of the revolt they put to death an additional 380 men, women and children, before the remaining Spaniards escaped to El Paso del Norte (now Ciudad Juarez in Mexico). Hundreds of Indians died also in the battles of that 1680 summer.

In 1681 Antonio de Otermin and his troops recaptured Isleta after a siege, and the procurator, Fray Francisco de Ayets, entered the pueblo on horseback. The five hundred and some Indians of the village made a procession to him, as he called out, “Blessed be the most holy sacrament and the purity of our lady, the Virgin Mary, conceived without sin!; To this the Indians replied: ‘Forever!’”<sup>19</sup> Father Ayeta then dismounted and was warmly embraced by the Indians.<sup>20</sup> The next day there was a Mass and rosary said at a portable altar in the middle of the plaza. Fray Ayeta granted forgiveness to the Indians for their participation in the revolt of the year before; he baptized children born since the revolt and encouraged husbands and wives joined in matrimony to rededicate themselves to one another. He reminded them of their vassalhood to the Spanish Crown and received apostates back “into the bosom of the church.”<sup>20</sup> Some of these, however, turned out to be spies for the rebel forces. Within a month a fifth of the Isleta population had disappeared from town, joining the Indians at other pueblos who were prepared to retake Isleta.

Otermin soon discovered that the Puebloans did not wish reconciliation with Spain or Church. One of his lieutenants told him, after attempting to

18. *Ibid.*, (Vol. 2), 247.

19. Hackett and Shelby. (Vol. 1), clxxv.

20. *Ibid.*, (Vol 1), clxxv.

retake several pueblos, "The unanimous opinion was that the Indians were very tenacious of their religious and economic customs, and, being apostates and rebels at heart, it was a hopeless task to try and get them to conform to Spanish and Christian ways of living." One squad leader "did not detect one trace of Christianity in any of the Indians." Another "could detect no true signs of repentance among the Indians." It was said that ". . . it would be an impossible task to subjugate the apostates."<sup>21</sup> As a result, the Spaniards burned eight of the southern pueblos, including Isleta, sacked three others, all villages belonging to Piro and southern Tiwa Indians hardly involved in the revolt, and took close to four hundred Christian Indians to El Paso for their protection. . . . The Northern Tiwas, Tewas and Towas who had fomented the insurrection as well as the Western Pueblos from Acoma to Hipiland were left untouched by Otermin's expedition. For the remainder of the 1680s the Pueblos lived free of Spanish control. Popè's legions destroyed the churches and the Christian images; they abandoned Christian names and bathed ritually to cleanse themselves of their Spanish associations. The Pueblos returned to their kivas and plazas to worship in the traditional manner.

The Spaniards did not abandon their hope to recapture their Indian subjects, and under the banner of Mary, Our Lady of the Rosary, Virgin of the Conquest, they vowed to reinstate Christianity among the Pueblos. Diego de Vargas Zapata Lujan Ponce de Leon became governor of New Mexico in 1688, and in 1691, when he took possession of the El Paso government, he made his plan for reconquest. The next year he led a military expedition into Santa Fe and the various pueblos, accompanied by friars. Vargas and the clerics pleaded with the Indians to become vassals of the crown and obedient servants of the pope once again, and without a single casualty the Indians seemed to acquiesce. Missionaries baptized over two-thousand Indians, mostly children born since the 1680 revolution.

By the beginning of 1694 Vargas and his legions held Santa Fe. From there the Franciscans began to reenter the pueblos and reestablish Catholicism among the Indians. Some padres viewed the process as one in which they had to start afresh among pagans and idolaters; others noted the extremes to which some Pueblo communities went to avoid contact with the missionaries. Still others characterized their task as a rudimentary one: reinstating catechism to willing Indians.<sup>22</sup>

In 1695 warnings came to the priests of an impending revolt, which took place in June 1696. The Indians killed five of the friars, a score of other Spaniards, and once again they burned and desecrated the mission churches

21. *Ibid.*, (Vol 1), clxxx.

22. Manuel J. Espinosa, trans. and ed. *The Pueblo Indian Revolt of 1696 and the Franciscan Missions in New Mexico. Letters of the Missionaries and Related Documents* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 1988), 91-159.

and convents, repeating the patterns of 1680. At several villages the Indian leaders remained loyal to the Spanish, but everywhere else there was rebellion. This time, however, the Spanish soldiers prevailed after six months, and an era of permanent Hispanic settlement of northern New Mexico began.

The Reconquest had taken hold, but to what effect upon Pueblo associations with Christianity? After a century of Catholic hegemony, Pueblo religion was deeply affected by Christian influences by the beginning of the eighteenth century. However hard the missionaries had tried to destroy native religiousness, and however hard the Indians had tried to compartmentalize the two religious traditions, there was cross-fertilization of ideas, images, organization and practices, although the exact form of these syncretisms is hard to know with any precision.

It is sometimes said that the Franciscans reentered the pueblos with a more tolerant attitude toward traditional Pueblo religion. After the reconquest, "later generations of Pueblos grew up in an environment in which one could be nominally Catholic and still be loyal to another tradition. . . . Since 1700, the Pueblos have added an unobtrusive Christianity to traditional patterns without fundamentally altering their solid precontact core."<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the Spanish accomplished the reconquest with promises of leniency, as long as the Indians kept up the churches and attended Catholic services. In addition, the eighteenth century witnessed the secularization of New Mexico. The Spanish kings cared less about missions than empires, and although the Franciscans might have wanted to end the religious practices of the Pueblo kivas, they lacked the resources to suppress them to any considerable extent, try as they might.

The number of pueblos had shrunk though revolution and reconquest to twenty-five, with a population dwindling towards fifteen thousand by mid-eighteenth century. The number of Franciscans was hardly enough to assert authority over the native Christians — no more than one to each pueblo, and in some cases the padres stationed themselves at Santa Fe, venturing only on occasion to their Indian missions.

With Mexican independence in 1821 the Franciscan missions eroded to almost the disappearing point, as the new civil powers removed the Spanish padres from their posts. As few as five remained by 1830. The Mexican government did away with all legal distinctions regarding the Pueblos, regarding them as tax-payers and landed citizens with municipal governments and well-sustaining agricultural economies. The bishopric of Durango claimed spiritual charge of the Indians, and even issued epistles concerning their treatment in the 1830s and 1840s; however, with the Franciscans gone the Indians received little, if any, attention from the Church.<sup>24</sup> In effect, "the missions existed in

23. Bowden, 1981. 57.

24. (Rev.) Angélico, Chàvez, O.F.M. *Archives of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe 1678-1900* (Washington D.D.:Academy of American Franciscan History 1957), 182, 185.

name only”<sup>25</sup> by the time the United States wrested control of the area and took legal charge of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848.

When Pope Pius IX erected the Vicariate Apostolic of New Mexico in 1850 and appointed John Baptiste Lamy to its leadership, the last of the Franciscans among the Pueblos was two years deceased. Fray Mariano de Jesus Lopez had tried to serve all the Indians between Isleta and Zuni until his death. With his passing the Pueblos continued to pay tithes to the Church, but they hardly ever received sacraments, a traveling cleric passing through at the most a few times each year. In 1851 Bishop Lamy arrived at his post to find approximately nine-thousand Pueblo Indians amidst (by his own account) sixty-eight thousand Catholics, two-thousand heretics, and thirty to forty-thousand infidels — Apaches, Navajos, Hopis, and other Native Americans.<sup>26</sup>

Lamy’s task was to assert his authority over the Mexican Catholics living within the new territory of the United States and under the jurisdiction of a newly created diocese. Their emotional loyalty was still to the bishopric of Durango — out of which New Mexico was carved — and to their Hispanic culture. The Frenchman Lamy took office with a new political regime; his allegiance was to the papacy, but also to the United States. Hence, he had difficulty winning the respect and obedience of the people, including the dozen or so priests, whom he viewed as “ ‘incapable or unworthy.’ ”<sup>27</sup> His struggle with Father Antonio Josè Martinez and the Hispanic clergy of New Mexico took much of his energy, and as a result Lamy devoted little of his resources to the spiritual care of the Pueblos.

When the Franciscans reentered the mission field in New Mexico around the turn of the twentieth century, they found the Pueblos “still strewing corn meal,” in the words of Fray Barnabas Meyer, O.F.M.<sup>28</sup> Some of them wondered “whether the Catholic policy of tolerating paganism, while hoping and trying to unsnarl the pueblo religious dichotomy, half pagan, half Christian, would net any long-term results; or whether the Protestant approach in demanding of its converts a complete cultural rupture with pueblo life was not sounder policy.”<sup>29</sup>

When Rudolph A. Gerken became Archbishop of Santa Fe in 1933, he expressed concern to the missionaries in his province that the Puebloans had retained too much of their traditional religiousness. He directed the missionar-

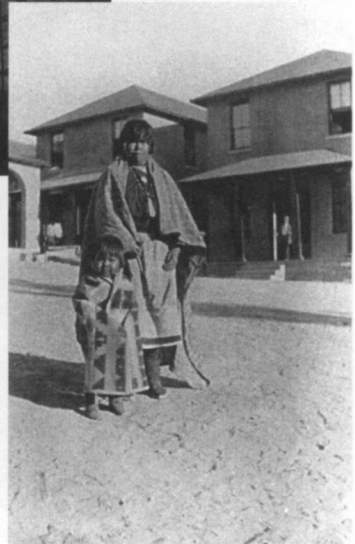
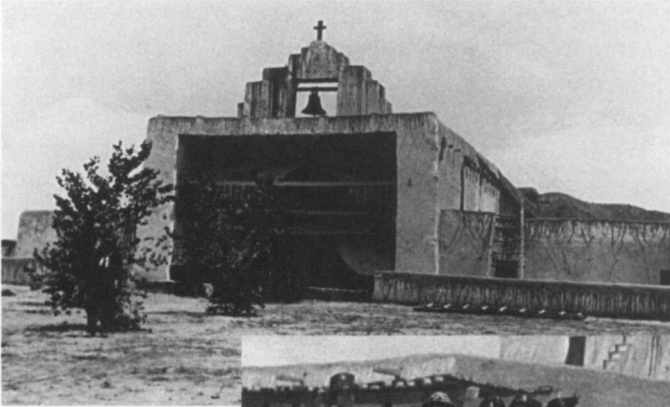
25. Mary Stanislaus Van Well, O.S.B. *The Educational Aspects of the Missions in the Southwest* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press 1942).

26. Paul Horgan. *Lamy of Santa Fe. His Life and Times* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1975), 127.

27. Kessell, 1980. 14.

28. *The Indian Sentinel*, (Vol. 12, No. 3, Summer 1932), 118.

29. Robert L. Wilken *Anselm Weber, O.F.M. Missionary to the Navaho 1898-12921* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company 1955), 168.



*1. The mission church of Santo Domingo  
(Courtesy: Archives of Marquette University)*

*2. Jerome Hesse, O.F.M., and friends, ca.  
1949*

*3. Interior of the mission church*

*4. Mother and child*

ies to reorganize their efforts in order to produce greater results among the Indians: “. . . it took 200 years to bring any pagan nation to . . . Christ. — We must not pass up any occasion to rid them of their pagan practices. However, we must be careful and prudent in our methods. We don’t want the revolutions of the past.”<sup>30</sup> He felt that the greatest progress occurred where priests and sisters were resident in the pueblos, and he encouraged such inroads. Two years later the archbishop acknowledged that of the ten-thousand Pueblo Indians in his archdiocese, many maintained a “large measure of ancient paganism.”<sup>31</sup> At the end of the 1930s a prominent anthropologist agreed with the archbishop’s assessment: “Catholicism has by and large enriched Pueblo religion, contributing God and the saints to the pantheon, fiestas to the calendar, candles and who knows how many other details to ritual,”<sup>32</sup> but Pueblo religiousness was still in force, still resistant to Catholic ingress.

Archbishop Gerken’s strategy to regularize the Pueblos’ Catholic practice met its fiercest resistance at the village of Santo Domingo, one of the largest pueblos and perhaps the most conservative. In a recent publication<sup>33</sup> I have reviewed the events of the 1930s, in which the archdiocese closed the pueblo to Catholic sacraments in an attempt to coerce conformity to Church rule. The pueblo held out successfully and thereby maintained its dual religious practice for decades to come.

During the 1940s and 1950s the Pueblos posed a singular difficulty for Church authorities. When Pope Pius XII asked Archbishop Edwin V. Byrne of Santa Fe about the spiritual conditions of the Pueblos, the archbishop reported that “almost 100 per cent of New Mexico’s 14,000 Pueblo Indians are members of the Church and that 18 out of the 19 Indian Pueblos within the state are officially Catholic.”<sup>34</sup> The pope was interested in the “romance” of the tribal customs, and the archbishop told him that going to the pueblos was like taking a step back in time. Byrne was impressed by the Indians’ stone-faced reverence in chapel, their courteousness before clerical authority and their pageantry. He also noted their technical proficiency in irrigating their fields and repairing their tractors, and their governmental stability. Thus he respected them for their traditionalism, their religiousness, and their elasticity in the modern world. Of course, he added, no white man knows what takes place in their kivas, and so far there were no Pueblo Catholic priests; however, in good time, he said, “God will take care of that.”<sup>35</sup> Among the Franciscans, however, the view was less sanguine. It was well understood that in the nineteenth cen-

30. Santa Fe Jemez. October 17, 1934.

31. *Indian Sentinel*, *The*, (Vol. 16, No. 7, September 1936), 101.

32. Elsie Clews Parsons. *Pueblo Indian Religion*, (Vol. 2. Pt. 2 1939), 1132.

33. Christopher Vecsey, “The Campaign to Regularize Pueblo Catholicism: Santo Domingo,” *European Review of Native American Studies*, (Vol. 9 No. 2 1995) 15-19.

34. Santa Fe Missions Indian — General 1943.

35. *Ibid.*, 118.

tury “practically all of these Pueblos were left unattended,” and “the Indians, never quite fully Christianized, slid back into their paganism, curiously taking with them the name of Catholic and some of the external rites and devotions that appealed to their essentially religious nature.”<sup>36</sup> Almost a century after the arrival of Archbishop Lamy, a half century after the return of the Franciscans, the situation had not changed considerably, according to Fray Angélico Chávez, O.F.M., in 1946. Most of the pueblos still lacked resident priests; there was little coordination of mission efforts; the traditional religion still held against Catholic efforts. Chávez called for “zealous” Franciscans (but not the “bulldog type of Padre”) to effect the changes in Pueblo faith by living in each village as in a parish. Should any pueblo refuse a resident priest, “let it be left without Mass and all ministrations or visits until it gives in.”<sup>37</sup> Hence, Church officials vacillated in their correspondence between romanticizing and pressurizing in responding to Puebloan religious persistence.

On the part of the Church officials, the public stance was one of relative satisfaction with *the status quo*. Archbishop Byrne wrote in 1961: “Our Pueblo Indians are friendly in their relations with priests . . . and evince interest in Catholic activities. Even though their customs seem suspicious at times, they proclaim their Catholicism and do not wish to associate with Protestants.”<sup>38</sup> A decade later, his successor, Archbishop James P. Davis, wrote that there are those who think that the Pueblo Indians are still tied to old ways, living their religious lives according to a “mixture between old ways and Catholicism. Others feel that for the most part they are as good Catholics as anywhere. I think this latter is true.”<sup>39</sup>

## The Isleta Controversy

Despite hopeful evaluations in the years surrounding Vatican II, not every pueblo was at peace with the Church. One priest working among the Pueblos said in 1965, that “The Indian believes in God; but he doesn’t want this Catholic God to get too close”<sup>40</sup> Another priest, writing of the 1680 revolution, but reflecting upon the tensions between Catholicism and Pueblo traditionalism in the late 1960s, made it clear that the Church still had to contend with “Native pueblo ritual and government,” which “required total surrender of the person.”<sup>41</sup>

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36. Ibid., 1946.

37. Ibid.

38. *Our Negro and Indian Missions* 1961, 26-27.

39. Ibid., 1971, 27.

40. Investiture Controversy, July 24, 1965.

41. Chávez 1967, 86.

The most rancorous dispute between Church and Pueblo, at least in the twentieth century (and perhaps since the reconquest) took place at the Southern Tiwa village of Isleta in 1965. In that year the civil authorities of the pueblo forcibly removed the resident Catholic priest, setting off a jurisdictional conflict with the Santa Fe Archdiocese that lasted for years.

Isleta's long association with Christianity dates at least to 1613, when its church was built. The walls of this edifice are still part of the present structure, arguably the oldest Catholic church walls extant in the United States today. The 1680 revolution, the Spanish attempt at recovery in 1681 and the reconquest of 1692-1696 left Isleta a ghost town, but in 1710 Fray Juan de la Peña gathered Tiwa Indians from various places in New Mexico to found a new village, situated around the church, now dedicated to St. Augustine. Through the eighteenth century and the first half of the next century, Isleta housed several Franciscans and received the visitations of others, but like the other pueblos, it was left mostly to develop its own forms of religious expression. Only after the arrival of Archbishop Lamy did the pueblo receive resident priests, several of whom were famous for their steadfastness and continuity. Father Anton Docher, for instance, served at Isleta from 1891 to 1926, constructing prominent spires on the adobe church. The priests of this era did not insist upon Catholic orthodoxy among the Pueblos, and Isletans persisted in many native practices.

When Archbishop Gerken conducted his inaugural inspection of Isleta in 1933, he "became convinced, that the work of Religious Instruction is entirely insufficient in the Pueblo for the Indians,"<sup>42</sup> and he ordered the pastor to secure the local U.S. Indian School for catechetical training. Sisters taught catechism at Isleta thereafter, and despite attempts by Baptists to lure Isletans from the Catholic fold ("coaxing the children to . . . Sunday School with candies,") according to the Governor of Isleta, Jose F. Jojola,<sup>43</sup> the pueblo earned a reputation among the Catholic hierarchy as a "model for all our Indian Pueblos in New Mexico."<sup>44</sup> Virtually every child attended Sunday Masses, and despite occasional complaints on the part of pueblo inhabitants regarding church personnel (a rectory cook,<sup>45</sup> a new priest,<sup>46</sup>) there were amicable relations between clergy and community. Isletans received communion and confessed their sins to the priests, often in the Tiwa language. One priest let the Indians know "that I could understand them if they told me their sins in the Isleta language. It sure went over big,"<sup>47</sup> and the turnout for the sacrament was immense. In the early

42. Santa Fe. Isleta. September 11, 1933

43. *Ibid.*, May 20, 1939.

44. *Ibid.*, March 16, 1951.

45. *Ibid.*, May 10, 1942.

46. *Ibid.*, April 12, 1944.

47. *Ibid.*, February 16, 1948.

1950s the pueblo sent two young men to seminary — potential vocations that did not succeed, but which indicated the community's close involvement with Catholicism. When Father Fred Stadtmueller received appointment to the parish of Isleta in 1955, he reported to Archbishop Byrne, "All is well here. The people are accepting me better than I had expected. I am very happy that Your Excellency gave me this parish."<sup>48</sup>

It was not long, however, before father Stadtmueller ran afoul of Isletan tradition. He objected to the Indians' practice of dancing in the church during Advent, "to 'adore the Infant,' as they put it,"<sup>49</sup> and he spoke in the pulpit "against their customs and traditions." Ramon Zuni, the Governor of Isleta, complained to the archbishop of these tensions, and Byrne suggested to his priest that Pueblo customs "be dealt with by using persuasion and *time*, instead of an 'ex nunc.'"<sup>50</sup> Stadtmueller was rankled by the Indians' challenge to his authority, however, and he was determined to take a stand against Indian insubordination and native religiousness. "Christmas is," he wrote to the chancery office,<sup>51</sup> "and I still have my scalp. The dance took place in Church, but I believe the church won a moral victory . . . good parishioners . . . are with me." Of Governor Zuni he remarked that the Indian had lived in wedlock blessed only by an Indian ceremony, and that he rarely attended Mass: "Still: he thinks that he is the head of the church (like the queen of England) and I am his assistant, vice president in charge of ecclesiastical ceremonies." The pueblo governor and the priest argued over the timing and placement of rituals marking the Christian calendar, and Stadtmueller tried to dissuade the governor from holding traditional dances. When Zuni asserted his authority in the pueblo, the priest told him, "I was not a little boy that could be called on the carpet."<sup>52</sup> When Stadtmueller argued that inebriated and divorced persons should not be permitted to dance in church on Christmas Eve, the governor "mumbled about his 'old customs. . .'"<sup>53</sup> The issues that sizzled in Santo Domingo in the 1930s — who holds sovereignty over religious matters in the pueblo, and what native religious rituals should be performed — were becoming incendiary matters in Isleta under Stadtmueller's charge.

Father Stadtmueller was a stickler for rules, not only among the Isletans, but in his other parishes. He followed strict canon law regarding confirmations, marriages and divorces, and church burials. To him, Pueblo ritualism — especially those ceremonies that seemed "cruel, or detrimental to Church worship"<sup>54</sup> — should have no place in the lives of baptized Catholics. Chancery

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48. *Ibid.*, August 3, 1955.

49. *Ibid.*, December 21, 1956.

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*, December 26, 1956.

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*, Mach 24, 1959.

personnel tried to deflect his public preaching against Pueblo religiousness, “until the right attitude about the traditional Pueblo ceremonials can be discussed by a conference of the priests working in Pueblos;”<sup>55</sup> however, Stadtmueller insisted upon attacking the native rites frontally. In 1959-1960 he had the church of St. Augustine remodeled — removing Father Docher’s spires — and the priest had a thirty-foot concrete slab of concrete poured in the churchyard. This was a deliberate affront to the Indians who traditionally danced there, their feet touching the sacred earth of the plaza. He called the concrete a dance platform and the Isletans were incensed. Some of them conducted a letter campaign against the priest — now a monsignor — accusing him and his housekeeper of immorality.<sup>56</sup> The monsignor retaliated by postponing confirmations at Isleta.

The Indians there followed the colonial Hispanic practice of infant Confirmation. Stadtmueller was convinced “that the faith of our Indians could be greatly helped if Confirmation were for them the great Sacrament of Adolescence. It would help to combat the initiation of so many of them into the secrets of the ‘kiva’ when they reach the age of puberty.”<sup>57</sup> The monsignor argued to his archbishop that the Isletans should undergo catechetical training before Confirmation in the Catholic faith. In his view, the majority of the Puebloans were deficient in their knowledge of Catholicism; they thought that “one can practice two religions,”<sup>58</sup> and they were attempting to receive the sacrament of Confirmation without participating in his catechetical program. “Confirming infants here,” he wrote, “would not only destroy this work, but would also make me the laughing stock of every member of the ‘Indian Religion’” at Isleta. Stadtmueller said that he had suffered “indignities” for many years in the pueblo, but “take my word for it, I will not be made the laughing stock of the medicine men and their followers.”<sup>59</sup> The archdiocese did not support Stadtmueller in his campaign against infant Confirmation, causing greater resentment on the part of the monsignor against the Indians of his parish.

Archbishop James P. Davis had just begun his tenure in Santa Fe in 1964 when representatives of Isleta petitioned him to resolve “the conflict and controversies of our people and Monsignor Stadtmueller.”<sup>60</sup> The monsignor had become more strident in his condemnation of the “pagan savages”<sup>61</sup> of Isleta, bragging to tourists at St. Augustine Church of his guns and tear gas, which he stashed in his rectory, ready for use, should an Indian uprising occur against

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55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*, November 15, 1960.

57. *Ibid.*, October 8, 1961.

58. *Ibid.*, January 10, 1963.

59. *Ibid.*

60. *Ibid.*, April 9, 1964.

61. *Ibid.*, July-September 1965.

him. When the civil authorities at Isleta put up ropes to screen their ceremonial dancers from automobile traffic on the reservation, Stadtmueller cut the cords and threatened to tote a shotgun in defense of his actions. Isleta Governor Juan B. Jojola asked Archbishop Davis to remove the priest, for his challenge to pueblo jurisdiction, for his insults to the community, and for his allegedly immoral relations with his housekeeper.”<sup>62</sup>

A year passed and Davis continued to consider the request for Stadtmueller’s transfer, without taking action. Further petitions came to him, recounting familiar charges, and in June 1965 the new Isleta Governor, Andy Abeita, requested a meeting with the archbishop to resolve the matter. To Abeita the major issue was that of religious practice. The Isletans wanted to continue “certain Catholic religious ceremonies,”<sup>63</sup> passed down by elders and the ancestors before them. These ceremonies were part of Isleta tradition, part of their Catholicism. They included processions, dances, the blessing of fields and the sanctifying of canes of civil authority, the corpus of Hispanic Pueblo Catholicism, dating at least to the eighteenth century and beyond. And yet Father Stadtmueller informed the Indians that “our traditions were nothing, that they can be changed,”<sup>64</sup> even though the Isletans learned them from the Spanish and the Church approved or permitted them for centuries.

The years passed, and it was not until 1974, after Archbishop Robert F. Sanchez had succeeded Davis, that rapprochement took place between Church and Isleta Pueblo. In that year the new archbishop assigned Monsignor Francis A. Reinberg as pastor at Isleta, which once again became a Catholic parish in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe. The new pastor agreed to remove the concrete slab in the churchyard, which had been the symbolic foundation of the dispute with Stadtmueller. After a decade the dispute finally came to an end, but without a conclusion to the issues that lay at the base of the quarrel.

During the ten years many Isletans became more integrated with the Catholic Church in New Mexico, through their association with non-Indian members of Ascension parish in Albuquerque. Other Isletans turned to charismatic Protestant sects, and the long hiatus from catechetical training on the reservation set back the catholicization of those Isletans who chose not to journey to Albuquerque for Catholic services and instruction. As a result, in 1983, a new parish priest, Fr. Bernard Loughrey, noted that at Isleta, “the majority of people although Baptized Catholics are poorly informed and no longer identify with the Church.”<sup>65</sup> Two years later, however, the same cleric reported that

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62. *Ibid.*, April 24, 1965.

63. *Ibid.*, June 7, 1965.

64. *Ibid.*, June 12, 1965.

65. Marquette University Memorial Library, Department of Special Collections, Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Diocesan Correspondence. Reports and Applications for Aid, 1976-1986 . . . August 10, 1983.

“people returned to the Sacraments . . . today our parish enjoys a very good spirit. . . .”<sup>66</sup> In the present day there are some Isletans who still feel “ashamed to be a Catholic,”<sup>67</sup> as a result of the set-to created by Stadtmueller, but for many the events of the 1960s and 1970s are but distant memory or a patch of history. Father Loughery endeared himself to the Isletans’ in his decade of service — he “had them eating out of his hand,” according to a Church official<sup>68</sup> — and opened up St. Augustine’s to Hispanics of the area, a sign of the Isletans’ increasing association with non-Indian Catholics and mainstream Catholicism in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe.

## The Contemporary Situation

In the 1970s, Archbishop Robert F. Sanchez created an Office of Indo-Hispano Affairs, and then an Indian Affairs Office, in order to foster “a greater awareness”<sup>69</sup> of Catholic faith among the Pueblos, and he labored vigorously to integrate the Indians in the life of the Church. During his tenure, in 1976, the first Pueblo Indian, Edmund Savilla from Isleta, received ordination to the Catholic priesthood, although his ordination did not lead to others among the Pueblos, at least in part because the Puebloans suspect that seminarians will reveal the secrets of kiva ceremonialism once they join the Catholic priesthood. By becoming priests of the Catholic Church they will turn their loyalties from the native priesthods<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, Father Savilla insists that his fellow Puebloans are devoted Catholics as well as tribal loyalists; when they celebrate their traditional feast days with native dances, they are not “tokenizing” Christianity<sup>71</sup> but rather participating in it with renewed vigor. Contemporary Pueblo Catholics — there are around fifty-thousand in Santa Fe Archdiocese and another fourteen-thousand in the Diocese of Gallup — still engage in dual religious participation, although various Church programs of the last several decades, since Vatican II, including Cursillo, the charismatic movement, the Tekakwitha Conference and the Indian Ministry of Santa Fe have brought increasing numbers of Puebloans into contact with non-Indian Catholics, and today they are more likely than ever before to engage in Catholic liturgies with non-Pueblos, both within their territory and around the United States. Puebloans are thankful for the changes brought about over the past several decades, particularly since the Second Vatican Council. Close to ninety percent

66. *Ibid.*, July 3, 1985.

67. Joseph Savilla Interview, August 6, 1993.

68. Paul A. Lenz Interview, November 19, 1993.

69. Marquette, Diocesan Correspondence . . . 1976.

70. Santa Fe. St. Francis Cathedral. 1981.

71. “Native American Catholics: People of the Spirit,” video TeleKETICS, Franciscan 1986.

of the Puebloans of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe in the 1990s are baptized Catholic. They recall the days when Pueblo religion — although tolerated by the local priests — was condemned officially as paganism. Had it not been for Vatican II, and more explicitly the reforms of Archbishop Sanchez, “we’d still be in the dead Church,”<sup>72</sup> they attest.

Father Savilla’s parents, Joseph and Peggy Savilla — he of Isleta, she an Oneida Indian from Wisconsin — served for a decade in the Indian Ministry of Santa Fe until 1993. They recite the history of Pueblo association with Catholicism as one of domination and subterfuge. Before the Spaniards arrived, they say, the Puebloans were “richer in spirituality” than they became after contact. The Pueblos under Franciscan control were “richer in spirituality” than they became after contact. The Pueblos under Franciscan control “had to day they were Catholics” in order to survive the regime, while “the missionaries claimed they converted them all.” For the Savillas, those Indians who resisted Oñate and his followers — those who had their limbs amputated, or who were executed, or who were sentenced to servitude to the padres, building churches as slaves — were “martyrs for their native faith.” After the revolution and reconquest of the late seventeenth century, the Indians determined that they “better play ball with the Spanish, while maintaining their own spirituality underground.”<sup>73</sup> In Joseph Savilla’s view, the Pueblos have maintained two parallel religious systems over the centuries, systems whose elements seemed “so similar” that being Pueblo and Catholic seemed a duplication of religious forms. Thus, Pueblo children were — and still are — named by their community (“baptized in their tradition”) and baptized by the priests of Catholicism — two parallel rituals producing the same function. Because the parallels are so close, the Indians felt — and continue to feel — at home in the Church, say the Savillas. Over the centuries the Pueblos have joined the Catholic tradition without eschewing their Pueblo religion; so, today, when a Pueblo child is born and raised, he or she becomes a Catholic because he is “branded as a Catholic; this is what you have to do” as a Pueblo Indian. Catholicism for the Puebloans is “your inheritance,” he says. It is made up of “respect for the elders, . . . loyalty to great grandparents, . . . ancestral respect.” The Pueblos “never forgot their ancestors, . . . no matter how far back,” and because their ancestors made Catholicism part of their religious life, the present generation participates in the same religious tradition as their forebears. Today, say the Savillas, “Catholicism is a Pueblo traditional religion.”<sup>74</sup>

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72. Joseph and Peggy Savilla Interview Orono, Maine, August 5, 1992.

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*